DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 416 306 CE 075 173

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TITLE	Gender Approach to Adult Literacy and Basic Education.
PUB DATE	1996-03-00
NOTE	8p.; Paper presented at the World Conference on Literacy (Philadelphia, PA, March 1996). For other papers from this conference, see CE 075 168, 171, 180, 183, 187, and CS 012 996, CS 013 000, 002.
AVAILABLE FROM	Thirty-three selected papers from this conference are available on the "Literacy Online" Web site: http://www.literacyonline.org
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Access to Education; *Adult Basic Education; *Adult Literacy; Developing Nations; Economic Development; Economically Disadvantaged; Females; Foreign Countries; *Literacy Education; Poverty; Program Design; Program Development; Rural Areas; *Sex Discrimination; Sex Fairness; *Womens Education
IDENTIFIERS	*Gender Issues

ABSTRACT

Women's literacy rates have improved in nearly all countries for which data are available. However, discrimination in access to education starts in early childhood and tends to continue throughout women's lives. Reproductive, productive, and community roles are considered family responsibilities to be assumed by women. Because these activities usually take most of their daily time, women can seldom attend educational activities. Other obstacles are husbands' opposition, religious beliefs, poverty, and the patriarchal ideology. Government programs make no distinction between men and women and contain a gender approach--one that presents women performing traditional roles. Educational activities are organized in places and with timetables unsuitable for women's and girls' regular attendance. Women's nongovernmental organizations organize literacy activities that use a feminist approach and focus on women's conditions and situations, practical needs, and strategic interest. Women's attendance would definitely increase if facilities are created to ease their workload while they attend the courses. Introducing a gender approach means to include such topics as the following: gender relations; social individuals' plurality; autonomy; family, community, and society relationships; and participation in the development process. Implementation of educational activities should include organizing subgroups of the main group. Research is needed on what gender issues to introduce, how, and when. (Contains 13 references.) (YLB)

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Gender Approach to Adult Literacy and Basic Education

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

| Why we are illiterate: a critical analysis of girls and women illiteracy | How we could organize successful basic education and literacy activities for girls and women and which contents to include? | When using a gender approach to adult education activities, what issues should be included? | How to implement educational activities with a gender approach, some recommendations | To address activities whereas for girls and women or with mixed groups, requests studies about what, how and when to introduce the gender issues. | References |

Population increase, poverty , economic and political programs far beyond the satisfaction of the population basic needs, in addition , difficulties for school age children to enroll in primary basic education, count among the reasons for illiteracy increase (in absolute numbers) in the world .

Unfortunately, the available data does not provide with an accurate picture of the illiteracy situation around the world. Countries differences on definitions of a literate person, difficulties in data collection and interpretation result, in an under estimation of the current situation.

The UNDP Human Development Report (1995) acknowledge that women's literacy rates have improved in nearly all countries for which data is available. Literacy rate are lower among rural women except for Estonia and Tajikistan. Iliterate women are concentrated mainly in rural and marginal urban areas, where social economic inequalities are more evident.

There has been a progress in girls' school enrolment. Primary school girls enrolment increasead in nearly all but 14 countries but there has been a lack of improvement in countries such as Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Zambia and zaire

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due to economic adjustment and budget draw back. Secondary- school-age girls show a more consistent enrolment across countries and with few exceptions countries have shown improvement in women tertiary-school-age enrolment ratios.

World wide, the adult illiteracy rate is 25% higher for women compared to men. According to Unesco (1994) women illiteracy rate in South Asia, reaches 68%, in Sub-Saharan Africa 63%; in the Arab States 54.4%.

Unfortunately, analysis on adult women illiteracy lack research and publications, therefor I shall refer to the situation on the base of the few systematized experiences and research produced by educators working on the subject.

Why we are illiterate: a critical analysis of girls and women illiteracy

In our societies, women fare less than men. Since their early ages they have less access to formal education and in many cases to food and health care. This discrimination that starts in early childhood tends to continue along their lives.

In most of the low income homes, women perform reproductive and productive roles leaving to a secondary place the income generation activities. In many cases women from rural and urban areas are also involved with community administration and work (Moser C. 1991).

Reproductive, productive and community roles are considered as family responsibilities to be assumed by women and because these activities usually take most of their daily time, it is common that they can seldom attend educational activities due to lack of time.

In fact, with scare resources and occupied with productive, reproductive and community activities they have many difficulties to share their spare time with literacy activities, specially if they are under nourished and in poor health conditions.

Many times they cannot attend literacy or education activities due to their husbands opposition. Men seldom agrees that women leave home on a regular basis, specially if is late at night or far from home and also sometimes, when activities are developed with mixed groups or if the teacher happens to be a man.

Others obstacles such as religion can constrain women' participation. The fact that some religions subdue women roles to the domestic domain, focuses even more their role as mothers, becoming a burden for its further involvement.

Educators and researchers agree that the main reason for women lack of participation in educational activities is the poverty situation where they have been living since birth. Girls have difficulties to attend formal schools and adult women to participate in literacy, and basic education especially if they are at an extreme poverty level and with unfilled basic needs. (Lind and Johnston 1990, Chlebowska 1991, Ballara 1992).

The "feminization of poverty" is a clear reference to women over representation among the poor. This inequality speaks by itself, in fact women face increasingly risks to become poor because of family rupture, divorce or separation, husband migration, undermining "women social active"

Feminists groups highlighting that the main responsables, of women's' illiteracy is due to their subordinate situation and because of partners fears to accept a more egalitarian position of women in the family as a result of their achievements gained through education.

Feminists argue that the patriarchal ideology rises obstacles on women participation because society expects certain conducts and behavior to be performed in domestic roles, conducts that relegate women to an inferior situation and assign them only "natural" roles such as family care and education. Also the sexual division of work and men control over women sexuality is a impediment for women participation in education. (Stromqvist N. 1991)

Literacy and education contribute to the development of critical thoughts and can jeopardize the expected conducts imposed to women by the society. It is a risk and a threat for those who benefit from women' subordinate position,

submissive attitude and unpaid work. Therefore, those who feel threaten, use various means and present several obstacles to hinder women and girls participation .

These issues that are deeply rooted in the patriarchal society and that certainly contributes for a better understanding of the women educational situation, are rarely referred among the reasons underlying their high illiteracy rate, increased drop-outs and difficulties in attending regular educational activities.

Better educated women means more social and economic benefits to their families and the society, literacy and education contributes to girls and women' self-esteem and increases its participation in family and at community levels. But the uncertainty of new behaviors, makes it difficult for men to accept the advantages of an educated partner, specially if the acquired knowledge could weaken his control on the family power.

It is common to hear stories on how men, using a variety of arguments, rise obstacles to women' participation in educational activities. Some husbands can go as far as locking up their wives, using psychological pressure and even battering them.

If learning to read and write helps to rise awareness and is a mean to obtain power, partners should be prepared in sharing it.

How we could organize successful basic education and literacy activities for girls and women and which contents to include ?

Governments usually organize these activities at national or local levels for a population where no distinction are made between men and woman, whereas, women NGOs linked to the feminist movements, implement literacy activities at local levels addressed to girls and women and including as well other activities .

Government literacy programs seldom contain a gender approach. Topics present women performing roles that consolidate the sexual division of work. Women are seen in their traditional roles and if reading and writing is linked to learning skills they emphasis domestic roles such as child care, nutrition, vaccination, family gardens etc.

A quick review on the contents of basic education and literacy programs in the world reveals that home economics and sewing and didactic materials with a sexist orientation are the common topics. Clearly, the programs are based on a organizational model that do not identify women situation neither integrate their needs and concerns.

Women situation are not taken into account. Educational activities are organized in places and with time tables unsuitable for women and girls regular attendance. The learning process is planned and structured in a sequence that assume girls and women regular and permanent attendance and no attention is given in the introduction of innovative and flexible methods adapted to their own learning pace and timetable. Moreover, usually these programs are organized without planning any support services that could ease girls and women's workload and guarantee their regular and permanent participation.

Literacy activities organized by Women NGOs use a feminist approach and focus on women condition and situation, their practical needs and strategic interests. , They work on issues such as subordination, discrimination, sexuality, violence, double and triple working schedule. These programs are locally implemented and the learning processes is linked to other activities such as income generation.

The few analysis that refer to these activities show encouraging results, better than the ones organized by the state. (Ballara 1992). These results arise from the fact that the organization, topics and methods responds to girls and women's needs.

Some researchers suggests that education activities should establish a balance between the knowledge to be achieved and

the knowledge women and girls are in need.

Based on the analysis that needs and interests are processes in construction and they are negotiated with the society and the powers, several women leaders have identified some further basic learning needs.

They propose that education activities should include negotiation training and conflict resolution training. This means that women and girls should be trained in WHAT and HOW t o negotiate, HOW and WHEN to consider other interests, WHEN and WITH WHOM make alliances, and HOW to bargain in an effective way with men.

Also contents that refer to the patriarchal ideology and cultural subordination should also be considered in order to help women and girls to analyze and be aware of their situation in the society.

These proposals leaves an open space to include also subjects such as citizenship, democratic practices, personal and social power distribution. Women should learn how to modify their environment so they can actively participate in the development of the society.

Effective educational activities must use a participatory approach. Women should be evolved in all stages of the program even if the programs implementation are lengthier and eventually more costly. Flexible, dynamic and innovative methods should be adapted to women learning pace, and timetables that ease girls and women attendance to literacy activities.

Planning women and girls basic education and literacy activities in small groups increases participants self-esteem and linking these activities to sound income generation activities or to a development project makes the learning process more efficient and effective.

Finally women attendance would definitely increase if facilities are created to ease their workload while attending the courses. Therefore programs and services such as food supply, child care and even groups that provide moral support should be organized together or as part of the program implementation.

When using a gender approach to adult education activities, what issues should be included?

Gender allude to social roles that can be modified or influenced (gender) and differs from the biological that cannot change. Gender as social category make references and allows analyses of different roles, responsibilities, rights, opportunities and limitations of men and women within the family, community, society and culture.

Gender is not a women synonym , but a term that replace the so called "sex roles". Gender is a term used to make references to women and men social relations.

Introducing a gender approach means to include subjects on gender relations, social individuals plurality, the concept of autonomy and the conflictive approach between social actors, alliances and negotiations, and on how to relate with the society.

Beside women's' condition and position, practical needs and strategic interests; learning needs should focus on topics such as information on the genders situation; how they interrelate within the family, community and in the society; how to participate in the development process with equal conditions and for the improvement of their life conditions.

This would help adults (men and women) to prepare themselves to face with positive attitudes the changes introduced with the new acquired knowledge, and to overcome threats and uncertainty emerged between couples by attitudes and role changes.

Teacher and adult educator training courses need to include the above topics. Gender approach should be included in the participants didactic materials and in ease-of-reference support material that include discussions guides to be provided to

educators to help building awareness sessions among all participants.

How to implement educational activities with a gender approach, some recommendations

To plan activities for groups with men and women participation, one has to take into consideration the obstacles and difficulties that girls and women face when joining mixed groups already addressed in this paper.

If the alternative chosen is to work with mixed groups, it is important to organize at the initial stages of the educational activities, small separated women sub groups as part of the main groups, with the tasks to strengthen the learning process and to discuss women particular problems. This proposal could help to overcome lack of self-esteem, discrimination or even uneasiness related to their participation in mixed groups. As in these groups women may still drag along their feelings of their subordinate situation. These feelings play an important role in their passive attitudes, weak engagement to group discussion or drop-outs.

To address activities whereas for girls and women or with mixed groups, requests studies about what, how and when to introduce the gender issues.

At local levels, one should observe the community genders situation and women positions and interests. Studies with focus on gender relations must be carried out and include expected changes due to women education. Also is recommended to develop research on the family and the community views on gender, as well as on power obstacles and on the way alliances are established and negotiate .

This proposals need trained educators in gender issues, well prepared to carry out studies and use of participatory approach. Educators need an accurate gender knowledge of the community where they are working, to enable favorable group discussions, analysis and to allow the needed changes among participants.

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